

The Holy Month Of Fasting

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According to Islamic teachings, Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijra calendar, is the month of fasting. Fasting is a universal practice. The Quran mentions that fasting was a common practice in all religions: "Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil" (2:183).

The Arabic equivalent of fasting is called 'saum'. It means abstinence, which is the spirit of Islamic fasting. In the month of Ramadan, believers abstain from food and drink for a limited period each day, that is, from dawn till sunset. They eat and drink during the night. This practice continues for a month.

Ostensibly, fasting means to abstain from food and drink but, in spirit, it includes abstaining from all kinds of undesirable activities. Staying away from food and drink during the day is symbolic abstinence. Ramadan is, in essence, a form of annual training for living a responsible life. Being of responsible character means doing what is wanted and refraining from all such deeds as are undesirable. Ramadan inculcates this kind of responsible character.

The month of Ramadan begins with the sighting of the moon. It is reported that when the Prophet of Islam saw the new moon of Ramadan, he said: "O God, make this month for us a month of peace and submission." This saying of the Prophet is like a pledge and the month of Ramadan begins from the taking of this pledge. According to the pledge, believers are required to live in peace, that is, be non-violent. This is the true spirit of the month of Ramadan.

During the month, believers are required to study the Quran more and more, in prayer and out of prayer. Through the study of the Quran in this month, we are reminded of the

message of the Quran; we rediscover the teachings of the Quran, and we reshape our minds according to Quranic tenets.

There is a special prayer, said daily in the month of Ramadan, called tarawih. It is observed after the isha prayer during the night. The faithful establish contact with God through the Quran, which is the Book of God.

The Prophet of Islam has said that the month of Ramadan is the month of philanthropy. Fasting makes believers more sensitive about hunger. They realise the seriousness of hunger, so they are more and more engaged in philanthropy during this month. As an incentive, the Prophet of Islam said that philanthropy in the month of Ramadan was rewardable more than in any other month.

The last 10 days of the month of Ramadan are the days of etikaf, that is, going into seclusion. Etikaf means sitting in the mosque for a limited period. It is a practice which saves one from all kinds of distraction. Etikaf is a period of meditation, contemplation, introspection, and self-improvement.

Ramadan is much more than fasting; it is the fostering of a culture of abstinence aimed at purifying thought, speech and general behaviour. The message of Ramadan is: be selective, differentiate between right and wrong; don't allow your desires to dominate you, but follow principles; abandon all immoral things forever just as you have abandoned food and drink for a month.

Ramadan makes people conscious about dos and don'ts. Ramadan is a course in spiritual development. It is a living practice and not just a ritual.

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